TENNESSEE

HISTORICAL MAGAZINE

Vol. 4 JUNE, 1918 No. 2

MEMPHIS RAILROAD CONVENTION, 1849.

The decade 1840-1850 was pre-eminently an era of railroad building in the South. During this period a conscious, if not altogether successful, effort was made by the South Atlantic cities, Charleston and Savannah, to revive their prosperity by tapping the upper Mississippi trade with railroads to Memphis, Nashville and Vicksburg.[1] But a rival scarcely recognized—the Northern railroads—built during this period directly into the old Northwest, and by 1849 it was fairly evident that the trade of the Northwest would be deflected not to Charleston but to New York. With the conclusion of the Mexican War in 1848, with its acquisition of Pacific territory, the South saw its way to transfer the commercial struggle from the valley to the Pacific. The struggle now became one for the Pacific trade, and the weapon a continental railroad from the valley to the Pacific. Both North and South wanted the railroad, but they were entirely unable to agree on its route.

The first definite project for a Pacific railroad had come in 1845 from Asa Whitney, a merchant of New York, who had lived for several years in China and was ambitious to exploit her trade. In 1845 and succeeding years he petitioned Congress for a land grant to aid him in constructing a railroad from Lake Michigan to the mouth of the Columbia. He kept up also a constant agitation before the state legislatures and chambers of commerce, and for three years his plan attained great notoriety in the newspapers over the land. When the treaty of Guadeloupe Hidalgo brought the Mexican war to a formal conclusion, the South, which had beforetime acquiesced in Whitney's scheme, began to plan for a more southern route. There were various routes suggested, beginning at Natchez, Vicksburg and Memphis, but the favorite plan was for a railroad from Memphis to Monterey. This plan was popularized

[1] "Southern Railroads and Western Trade" in *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* for March, 1917.

if not originated, by Lieutenant Matthew F. Maury, and was quite generally known as the Maury plan. With the coming of 1849, St. Louis became a contender for terminal honors and in February of that year Senator Benton introduced into Congress a bill for a railroad from St. Louis to San Francisco, with branches to the mouth of the Columbia.

It remains to notice the attitude of New Orleans and Chicago to these plans. New Orleans, unable to see any possible commercial advantage for herself in the Memphis plan any more than in any of the others, steadfastly withheld her support and advocated instead a railroad across the isthmus of Tehuantepec or Panama. The commercial fortunes of Chicago were bound up with the political aspirations of Stephen A. Douglas. He had what he termed a "compromise plan" for a railroad from Council Bluffs to the Pacific through South Pass. He had been advocating this as early as 1845.

For some time the arguments and recriminations of the advocates of these different routes went on through newspapers and speeches and memorials to Congress until finally in 1849 the West bethought itself of its old weapon used at Memphis in 1845 and at Chicago in 1847. The spring of 1849 saw two cities, St. Louis and Memphis, preparing to hold general railroad conventions for the purpose of advancing their respective interests.

The initiative in the calling of a convention to consider the question of the Pacific railroad was taken in 1849 by Arkansas; it will be remembered that the Memphis convention of 1845 also had its origin in Arkansas. In 1845 the primary motive actuating this State was the completing of her military road from Memphis to Little Rock; in 1849 the prospect of obtaining the Pacific railroad through her land impelled her to action. January 6, 1849, the citizens of Pulaski County, members of the State legislature and others organized themselves into a convention at Little Rock to consider the question of the Pacific railroad. This convention, among other things, adopted a resolution for a general convention to be held at Memphis, July 4, to deliberate on the same question. Two days later the Arkansas legislature passed formal resolutions to the same purpose, and the movement for the Memphis convention was under way.[2]

The press of Tennessee and Arkansas echoed the resolutions of the Arkansas legislature. In a short time—March 30, 1849—the mayor of Memphis called a mass meeting to take action. This meeting resulted in the appointment of the usual com-

[2] *Arkansas Democrat*, January 12, 1849.

mittees of correspondence and of arrangements.[3] The committee of correspondence in the latter part of April issued the call for the convention by a "Circular to the Citizens of the United States."[4] The circular declared that the question of reaching the riches of California was now engaging the attention of all the people. A railroad thither was not visionary. It would be fraught with benefit to all, and would be specially useful in opening up the trade with Asia. Of all the prospective routes for the railroad, that from Memphis was the best one for reasons of distance, topography and climate. The railroad must start from a point below the mouth of the Ohio, since most of the West was above it. The St. Louis route would mean that the trade of the lower Mississippi must come up stream and this would necessitate the use of steamboats instead of flatboats.

This "circular" was sent out to the press for publication and was thus distributed widely over the country. As in the case of the conventions of 1845 and of 1847, invitations were sent out to the prominent leaders of both parties urging their attendance. The invitation to Calhoun drew from him a most remarkable reply. In a letter written from Fort Hill May 26, he pleaded a previous engagement as his reason for not attending. The object of the convention was an important one, but before deciding on the termini of the railroad, the route plan and cost should be settled; a survey would be required for this. Moreover, the connections to be made with the Eastern roads were to be taken into consideration; *the good of the entire Union was to be considered.* Yet, as Calhoun closed his letter, there was little use for the South to build into the West if the Southern people were to be shut out of the western territory.[5] The shadow of the coming slavery dispute lay heavily over Calhoun's spirit; already he was brooding over his speech of next March. Railroads and internal improvements meant little to the dying statesman; his whole thought was given to safeguarding the rights of his "poor South." The letter of Calhoun was widely published in the southern and western papers, and excited great comment—much of it adverse. Before the writing of this letter it was the general expectation that Calhoun would preside over the convention of 1849 as he had over that of 1845.[6] The Arkansas *Democrat* criticized Calhoun for injecting the slavery issue into the railroad question. It called him a "politician with favorite theories" who had one eye on

[3] *Ibid.*, May 18, 1849.
[4] *Charleston Mercury*, May 22, 1849.
[5] *Arkansas Democrat*, June 22, 1849.
[6] *Western Eagle*, June 8, 1849.

the presidency.[7] The New Orleans *Commercial Bulletin* approved of the letter of refusal, but printed the slavery portion without comment.[8] The Richmond *Whig* said that Calhoun's attitude toward the Pacific railroad was like the action of the tribesman in interior Russia who when greatly insulted by another goes and hangs himself before his door for revenge.[9] The Memphis *Eagle* asserted that there were not twenty sane men who approved Calhoun's course. He was a "South Carolina nullifier—the great Impracticable" and had a "gloomy and erratic mind.[10] A letter from "One of the People" to the St. Louis *Reveille* defended Calhoun, saying rather pointedly that he was not the only politician trying to connect the Pacific railroad with the presidency.[11]

Meanwhile, the delegates were being selected. The Governor of South Carolina appointed over one hundred; the Governor of Florida appointed sixty; the Governor of Georgia appointed one hundred; the delegates from Arkansas were selected at county mass meetings; the larger cities of the South and West sent special delegations.[12] But in 1849, as in 1845, Memphis seemed destined to ill luck in getting her convention assembled. In the summer of 1849 the cholera appeared in the West and swept the valley like a flame. Not a city escaped it. From Galena to New Orleans men died like cattle falling in the streets and prostrated in their homes. The West had never experienced such an affliction. Hospitals failed the people and at the last even the cemeteries. No relief could be had from medical art and the plague raged unchecked until it literally wore itself out. In the midst of such conditions, men gave no thoughts to internal improvements or railroad terminals. On June 5 the committee on arrangements changed the date of holding the convention, postponing it from July 4 to October 16.[13] The same committee at once sent out a circular to the newspapers announcing the change of date and the reason for it.[14] The *Reveille* the next week suggested that the date had been changed because it did not suit Calhoun's convenience to be present in July, and voiced the suspicion that the whole scheme for a convention had been concocted by him for fur-

[7]Issue of June 22, 1849.
[8]Issue of June 12, 1849.
[9]Quoted in the *St. Louis Weekly Revielle*, July 30, 1849.
[10]Quoted in the *St. Louis Weekly Reveille*, June 23, 1849.
[11]Issue of July 7, 1849.
[12]*Arkansas Democrat*, May 21, June 13 and July 13, 1849.
[13]*Ibid.*, June 15, 1849.
[14]*Charleston Courier*, June 16, 1849.

thering his personal ambitions.[15] The Memphis *Eagle,* however, pointed out that the convention had been changed without any reference to Calhoun and before he had been heard from.[16] On the 19th of June the committee on arrangements again changed the date of the convention from October 16 to October 23 in order to avoid a conflict with the convention to be held at St. Louis on the former date.[17]

During July and August, while the cholera raged in the valley, the convention movement languished. On September 1, however, the committee on invitations sent out another circular through the press saying that the danger from cholera was now past, and renewing the invitation to the convention.[18] From this time until the meeting of the convention the press of the South and West gave much attention to the subject. The New Orleans *Crescent* urged that the Louisiana delegation selected for Memphis should also attend the St. Louis meeting so as to get a comparison of views. The Mobile *Herald* opposed the convention and wanted a railroad from the mouth of the Ohio westward.[19] The *Reveille* urged that St. Louis and Memphis compromise or else Whitney would win over them both. The railroads of South Carolina and Georgia announced free passage for the delegates to and from both conventions.[20] Whitney prepared to attend the Memphis convention.

St. Louis appointed delegates to the Memphis convention and Memphis returned the courtesy. The papers of Charleston urged that the South be well represented at Memphis in order to extend the Southern railroads west.[21] Nashville selected a delegation charged with the same purpose. The sentiment of New Orleans ranged from passive resignation to open hostility. A delegation was chosen to attend the Memphis convention, but it was instructed by a mass meeting October 5 to work for the Tehuantepec route and at a meeting of the delegation a few days previous a resolution was offered that the Tehuantepec route be brought to the notice of the convention.[22] Before leaving for Memphis the delegation met and voted down a resolution offered by DeBow to support any measure for a Pacific railroad via El Paso and the Gila River, no matter what the

[15]Issue of June 12, 1849.
[16]Issue of June 16, 1849.
[17]*Arkansas Democrat,* July 27, 1849.
[18]*American Railroad Journal,* 22:615.
[19]*New Orleans Commercial Bulletin,* October 2, 1849.
[20]*Charleston Mercury,* September 14, 1849.
[21]*Charleston Courier,* October 9, 1849.
[22]*Commercial Bulletin,* October 2 and 6, 1849.

eastern terminal should be.[23] And so in the midst of conflicting interests the convention of 1849, like that of 1845, assembled for its deliberations.

At 11:30 o'clock on the morning of October 23, 1849 the delegates assembled in the Exchange building at Memphis and were called to order by Dr. Fearn of Alabama.[24] On motion, Col. Absalom Fowler, of Arkansas, took the chair, after which a prayer was offered by the Right Reverend Bishop Otey. The usual routine of organization was followed; a secretary with two assistants was appointed and a committee selected of one from each State to select permanent officers. A recess of fifteen minutes afforded time for the different delegations to select their respective members and with this business achieved the convention rested from its labors and adjourned until 4 p.m. The delegation were to hand in a list of their members during the time of adjournment.

Upon coming together in the afternoon Lieutenant Maury was named as president of the convention. Maury's part in advocating the Pacific road has already been mentioned. He had been present at the St. Louis convention now just ended and had acted as one of the vice-presidents of that gathering. Upon taking the chair he made a short speech of some twenty minutes duration. He gave the reasons why a railroad to the Pacific was necessary and asserted that even if the road should not prove profitable, still it was needed for military reasons. He had examined fifty railroads, he said, and had come to the conclusion that heavy articles could never be carried over a Pacific road because of the heavy freight rates. Cotton, sugar, tobacco, etc., could be transported for three cents a mile. He thought that the Isthmus road should be built at once. The conclusion of his speech was an eloquent plea for harmony.[25] Maury's speech came as a surprise to most of the delegates and was much criticized for its approval of the Tehuantepec route. That subject had not been included in the call of the convention, but Maury's speech and the advocacy of the Louisiana delegation kept it from now on prominently before the convention. The convention closed the first day by naming fourteen vice-presidents and nine secretaries and forming a Rules committee of one from each State.

When the lists of delegates were handed in, there proved

[23] *Arkansas Democrat,* October 12, 1849; *Memphis Appeal,* October 6, 1849.

[24] *Minutes and Proceedings of the Memphis Convention* (Memphis, 1850). The details of the convention are taken from the minutes unless other reference is cited.

[25] *Charleston Courier,* October 29, 1849; *Arkansas Democrat,* November 16, 1849; *Minutes and Proceedings.*

to be 392 members present.[26] Of these 221 came from the two states of Tennessee and Mississippi, and the remainder were distributed among thirteen states. Of the Southern states only Florida and North Carolina were unrepresented. Illinois had two, Pennsylvania five, Massachusetts two and New York one. None of Virginia's three delegates were residents of Virginia. A fair percentage of the delegates had been accredited to the St. Louis convention as well as to that of Memphis. There is hardly a doubt that many of the delegates were not delegates at all, but only visitors in Memphis or transient residents. In number the convention fell below that of 1845 nor was there an equality in the character of the delegations. Maury was by all odds the best known man. Loughborough, of Missouri; Clay, of Alabama; Hall, of Illinois; De Bow, of Louisiana, and Trezevant, who served as a representative of Virginia were all well known men in various walks of life, but the list cannot well be increased. Whitney was present as a visitor and was invited to a seat in the convention. Jefferson Davis looked in at the closing hours and was warmly greeted. But a student of the convention cannot rid himself of the feeling that the South had failed to send her best men. No doubt the coming political storm was distracting the attention, and perhaps there was some feeling gaining ground that, after all, railroads were not likely to be prodigiously advanced by conventions. At any rate the papers took no such stock of this meeting as of that in 1845. The reports were brief and stereotyped; even the Memphis papers went to little trouble in reporting the meetings, and a reading of the papers in this connection adds little to the account given in the Minutes.

eYt the proceedings of the convention were far from being uninteresting. On the morning of the second day, the rules committee reported a resolution which was adopted, that the rules of the House of Representativs should prevail except in case of a division; at such times each state should have one vote. A resolutions committee was formed by each state selecting two of its members to serve thereon. So far the business had been only that of the necessary routine. A spice of variety was injected when the convention invited Whitney to take a seat as the guest of the convention. A member at once moved that a like invitation be extended to all ladies within 100 miles; this was promptly amended to 3,000 miles and adopted. With the convention in this hilarious mood, the committee sent from the St. Louis convention asked leave to make a report.[27]

[26]The *Arkansas Democrat,* November 2, 1849, gives a list of 372.

[27]For an account of the St. Louis Convention see the *Missouri Historical Review* for July, 1918. The convention closed its work by

The report asserted that St. Louis had held her convention free from party and sectionalism; it had been a national undertaking. In its final resolution St. Louis showed its desire for harmony and cooperation with Memphis. "We have had sad experience at St. Louis," said the committee, "of the folly and danger of awakening discussions which in their nature must be productive of strifes and divisions." The report was laid on the table.

With the report of this committee the dormant jealousies of the different factions made their appearance. From this time on little trace was to be seen of the high good humor with which the convention began its work; St. Louis, Memphis and New Orleans set to work resolutely and acrimoniously to sway the convention. Benton, Calhoun and Douglas all had formulated plans, said the *New York Herald;* "all candidates," it added with a criminal attempt at punning, "have plans for the railroad and must define his route or be routed." Anthony, of Arkansas, criticized Maury's opening speech for bringing before the convention irrelevant schemes; Arkansas in proposing the convention had supposed its attention would be limited to plans for a railroad through Arkansas. Maury replied and the discussion grew heated. Then began the offering of a wild medley of resolutions from every section of the house. Five of these, at least, may be termed resolutions of compromise. Larue, of Louisiana, wanted the territory between the Mississippi and the Pacific surveyed by the United States for a military road, and contracts to be made in the meantime for carrying the mails across the Isthmus by railroad or canal. Another member of the Louisiana delegation, De Bow, asked for a committee of seven to memorialize Congress on the subject of a Pacific railroad. Col. R. Topp offered four resolutions declaring it the duty of the United States at an early date to build a railroad from the Mississippi to the Pacific with branch lines to the Lakes and the Gulf—the best route to be determined by a survey. Campbell, of Arkansas, thought that in view of the constitutional doubts that had been displayed at St. Louis, an amendment should be made to the United States Constitution authorizing the proposed railroad, and that land should be granted to the states to aid them in their internal improvements. Loughborough offered the resolutions that had been adopted by the St. Louis convention.

The two resolutions offered on this day for the purpose of binding the convention to a specific route both came from Texas

adopting a resolution for a Pacific railroad to start outside the limits of the States, but to have branch lines to Chicago, St. Louis and Memphis.

delegates. One was that the route should be from the mouth of the Ohio through northern Texas and El Paso to San Diego, and if necessary a further purchase of land from Mexico should be made for the right of way. From Watkins, of Arkansas, came a resolution that brought the day's confusion to a climax. It was to the effect that the building of the Pacific railroad by the United States was constitutional and that Congress had legal power to undertake it. All the other resolutions had been referred as a matter of course to the committee on resolutions, but this last called for a different action; a determined effort was made to lay it on the table and as a division was necessary an adjournment was taken till 4 p.m. to enable the delegation to consult. Upon re-assembling the resolution was tabled 10 to 4. This was the only business attempted in the afternoon and the convention adjourned in confusion. The proceedings of the entire day had been marked by laxness and informality. As usual the undercurrents had been most important and of these, perhaps the attention given to the Tehuantepec route was the most significant of all. Maury's opening speech, with the proselyting efforts of the Louisiana delegation, had introduced a bone of contention into the deliberations.[28]

It can hardly be said that the third day of the convention was an improvement on the second. Maury was ill—as, indeed, he might well be—and Senator Clay presided. The time was mostly taken up by fierce wrangling on the part of Borland, of Arkansas, Bowlin, of Missouri, and Woodward, of South Carolina. The beginning of the dispute was two resolutions offered by Borland that the United States Army should make a survey in order to find the best route, and that the best naval station on the Pacific coast should be determined by a hydrographical survey. In explanation, Borland said that everyone was ignorant about the routes to the Pacific; even the Senate committee on public lands had not had enough information to justify it in committing the United States to any certain route. He asked for a vote on his resolutions. Walker, of Louisiana, at once undertook to reply, saying that Louisiana favored all routes, but thought that the public mind should give attention to the Tehuantepec route as the most practical project at present. Borland rejoined that he did not suppose the convention had met for the purpose of furthering an alien route. Woodward injected further acrimony into the debate by offering resolutions for the Memphis-San Diego route and supporting them in a speech filled with sarcastic reference to the other plans. He was frankly local, he said, and did not have any great opinion of "national" projects. An allusion to Walker's

[28] *Arkansas Democrat*, November 2, 1849.

use of metaphors brought from that gentleman the retort that he considered his metaphors as good as the wooden wit of some other people. Bowlin took occasion too deplore localism in considering a question so great. He declared that St. Louis was holding out an olive branch to the other sections by the action of her convention; she has specially taken Memphis under her wing. These unfortunate expressions brought Walker again to his feet with the reply that St. Louis was not so much offering an olive branch to Memphis as a railroad branch, and a motion was at once made that Memphis take St. Louis under her wings in return for her favor to Memphis.[29] A Mississippi delegate, with the obvious intention of oiling the troubled waters, moved that Congress be memorialized *only* for surveys of possible routes, but the convention contented itself with referring all resolutions to the committee, except that of DeBow offered the day before. This is adopted and then adjourned—it may be supposed, thankfully—until the next day at ten.

On the fourth day the convention resumed its sittings with Clay again in the chair. The day opened with a speech by Hall of Illinois denouncing Whitney's scheme for a railroad and, without announcing a plan of his own, pleading for harmony.[30] The convention, being impartially hostile to both men, invited Whitney to reply in the afternoon. The committee on resolutions now presented its report. This report embraced nine resolutions setting forth that it was the duty of the national government to provide for a Pacific railroad, that for this purpose surveys should be made and then the route chosen which appeared the best—that being the best road which was easiest of access, best for national defense, most central, convenient and cheap. From this trunk line, branches should be built by donations of the public domain, making connections with all state roads. Military posts should be established in the West to facilitate surveying and construction.

To these six resolutions of a general nature were added four more of a very specific meaning. The Isthmus railroad and canal movement should be encouraged by giving to companies, formed for such purposes, contracts for mails, etc. Public lands within the limits of any state should be granted to such state as an aid to it in making internal improvements. And, finally, the convention recommended to the United States that the railroad should be built by a route from San Diego *via* the Gila River, El Paso, the northeastern boundary of

[29]For a lively account of this debate see the *Memphis Appeal* of October 27, 1849.

[30]Hall had been the most active promoter of the River and Harbor Convention held in Chicago in July, 1847, and had then taken occasion to denounce Whitney.

Texas between 32 and 33 degree, and reach the Mississippi between the Red and the Ohio.

This surprising and contradictory set of resolutions had been wrought out by the committee with much effort and debate.[31] The question of the Tehauntepec road, brought up in Maury's opening speech and strongly advocated by the Louisiana delegation, had occasioned much trouble; finally it was decided to formulate two kinds of resolutions—general and special. A sub-committee was formed for the former task and the first six resolutions resulted from their labors. All these were drafted with the design of agreeing with the action of the St. Louis convention. The grestest debate came on the special resolutions forming the last part of the report. Some of these had been passed with the greatest reluctance and, if we may trust a St. Louis account, the most important of all—the Gila route—actually by a mistake owing to a misreading by the secretary. It is unnecessary to say that the final resolution undid anything that had been accomplished for harmony by the preceding ones.

Whatever may have been the heartburnings of the committee, the convention showed little hesitation in adopting the report "with tremendous applause." A resolute effort was made to defeat the Gila resolution by Bowlin, Kirkwood of Arkansas, and Woodward. The first named gentleman demanded the yeas and nays. The vote when taken showed 10 to 4 for the resolution. Kirkwood and Woodward objected rather to the phraseology of the resolution than to the subject matter.

In such manner did the Memphis convention reject the "olive branch" extended it by the St. Louis convention. There was to be no amalgamation of Southern interests with those of the North. If St. Louis and the border states chose to dally with the North, they need not expect sympathy from the lower South. The South would even go its own path. Yet nothing is clearer than the fact that the sectionalism of the South as displayed at the convention was a commercial sectionalism alone; the most minute search will find in it little of any other spirit than that of commercial rivalry with the North. The time was to come, however, in the next decade when the South was to deem its railroad extension as of no more worth than the expansion of slavery. When that time came in 1854 there was effected between the Northwest and the South what may fairly be called a concession by the South to the Northwest of the Pacific railroad in return for the concession to the South of

[31] There were eight members of this committee, and among them DeBow and Maury. For inner workings of this committee see the *Reveille*, November 19, 1849.

the expansion of slave territory. But in 1849, at least, the mutual concession was yet unthought of.

The uncompromising spirit of the South at this time was still further shown by the action of the convention in rejecting the invitation of St. Louis to meet with her in convention at Philadelphia next spring. On the night of the 25th the convention held its last session.[32] Its business was finished and the only purpose of the meeting was speech-making. Whitney came first with an interesting, though familiar, talk on the relation of Asiatic commerce to the need of a Pacific railroad. He illustrated his speech with maps, but declared that he was advocating no special route. He did, however, oppose the Gila route on account of the distance involved and asserted that such a route would be at a disadvantage compared to the relatively short way around the Cape of Good Hope. Forsby, of Louisiana, spoke briefly in vindication of Whitney, and Woodward also made an address. In the closing minutes it was discovered that Jefferson Davis was in the house. He was called on for a speech but declined; he was weary, he said and travel worn. An imaginative recorder might see in his appearance at the close of the convention a significant portent of the rise and predominance of other issues than railroads at the South.

In due time there was prepared a *Memorial to Congress* and an *Address to the People of the United States.* The *Memorial* recited and explained the ten resolutions adopted by the convention, pointing out specially that, although it advocated the use of public lands for railroad construction, it was careful not to specify the method. The address set forth that a Pacific railroad was necessitated by the increasing population of the West consequent on the acquisition of Oregon and the territory of Mexico. The convention had recommended three things—a Pacific railroad, an Isthmus canal or railroad, and a military road along the Mexican frontier. It adverted to the Asiatic commerce, and declared the nation equal to the task of securing it. The reasons for the Gila route were set forth in detail. The Isthmus road was to be a private one. Alabama, South Carolina, Georgia and Louisiana and Mississippi were in favor of it. Representative Stanton of Tennessee made himself sponsor for the *Memorial* and on the 25th of February, 1850, introduced it into the House of Representatives. Objection was made to its reference and the *Memorial* never came up for consideration; even when Stanton asked leave to withdraw it, as he did on the fourteenth of March, permission was not given him and it remained unnoticed by a body that was bent on considering things more exciting in their nature than Pacific railroads.

R. S. COTTERILL.

[32] *Memphis Appeal,* October 30, 1849.